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Moisio, Sami

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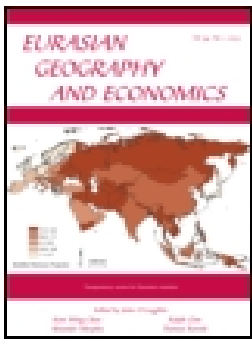
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# State power and the COVID-19 pandemic: the case of Finland

Sami Moisio 

Geosciences and Geography, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

## ABSTRACT

This paper first discusses some of the basic spatial features of the COVID-19 crisis in Finland. Second, it considers the role of the state and state power in response to the pandemic and explores some of the geopolitical aspects of COVID-19 in the Finnish context. Finally, it argues that the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the role of health care as a crucial constituent of state power. The COVID-19 crisis has not only made state power more clearly visible, but has also revealed some of the ways in which the “extra-economic” occupies a central position in maintaining both economic and societal order.

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## Introduction

In 2020, COVID-19 spread with varying speed in different parts of the world, with reproduction numbers varying between 1.4–6.47 (Cheng and Shan 2020). Even though the pandemic has a biological foundation, it has quickly taken a fundamental political-economic, societal and geographical form. Lockdowns, mobility restrictions, stay-at-home orders, financial rescue packages, inter-state tensions, state border closings, digital surveillance, the concentration of infections in cities, and the politics of expert knowledge all underscore the fact that COVID-19 is much more than a biological phenomenon. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic discloses some of the central dimensions of state power in general, and the re-production of state power in the practices of health care and economic policy in particular.

In this contribution, I first examine some of the basic geographic details regarding the ways in which COVID-19 has spread in Finland. Second, I discuss the ensuing economic crisis management of the Finnish state, and provide some insights for understanding the necessary relationship between the territorial state and capitalism. In the concluding section, I elaborate upon the functioning of

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**CONTACT** Sami Moisio,  [sami.moisio@helsinki.fi](mailto:sami.moisio@helsinki.fi)  Department of Geosciences and Geography, PO Box 4, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland

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health care and population health knowledge as essential extra-economic practices in maintaining state power and capitalist economic and societal order during the crisis.

### **COVID-19 in Finland: a short historical geography**

In Finland, the COVID-19 epidemic broke out in early March 2020. Since then, the number of daily infections has increased steadily, peaking on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April with 210 reported cases. The curve has been flattening since mid-April. By the 8 June 2020, 7,001 people had tested positive for the virus and 323 people had died (59 deaths per one million people). The combination of the health security capacity (according to the Global Health Security Index) of Finland (Nuclear Threat Initiative & The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security 2019) and the COVID-19 mortality rate, signals that Finland belongs to the group of states with high health security capacities and a relatively low COVID-19 mortality rate (cf. Chung, Xu, and Zhang 2020). As such, Finland differs from some of its European counterparts, notably including Sweden.

The recorded infections have been concentrated spatially: 72% of the confirmed cases are in the health care district of Uusimaa that covers about 31% of Finland's total population of 5,530,000. Conversely, 13 out of Finland's 21 health care districts reported less than 100 cases by mid-May, leaving large parts of the country almost intact (Statistics Finland 2020; Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020). If the urban is understood in both physical and social proximity terms, the purported anti-urban nature of the virus has sparked some speculation concerning the potential of the pandemic to alter the trend of urbanization in Finland by changing the preferences of citizens regarding housing and work. Theories of urban agglomeration by scholars such as Enrico Moretti (2013) and Edward Glaeser (2012) have figured prominently in Finnish debates on economic policy for some time already, and COVID-19 has been debated as potentially challenging the image and functioning of large cities as attractive innovation machines. To date, there is however little evidence that the COVID-19 crisis would have reinforced the competitiveness of small towns or rural areas. On the contrary, the geographical content of the stimulus packages launched by the Finnish government in May and June 2020 raises concerns that the crisis has the potential to reinforce the existing structural inequalities between major urban regions and the regions that suffer from long-term structural problems.

To date, 61% of all recorded infections in Finland are within the Helsinki city-region (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020). Even though this is the most urbanized area of Finland, the three major cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa together contribute only 21% of the total population of the country (Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council 2020). In the Helsinki city-region, some areas with below-average income levels suffer from higher-than-average rates



of coronavirus infection (City of Helsinki 2020), thus disclosing the same uneven pattern of geographical distribution of infections that has been detected in large urban areas elsewhere. The “white collar quarantine” (Woods 2020), which stands for the different capacities to work from home between occupations, seems to apply in Finland, too. This latter point signals how the COVID-19 epidemic has highlighted the issue of social class in the Nordic context.

### **The geopolitics of the COVID-19 in Finland: on the autonomous power of the state**

In addition to the basic geographical patterning of the epidemic in Finland, its geopolitical nature has become strikingly evident. The pandemic has not only been articulated (sometimes through references to war) as a national security issue, but it has also rendered state power visible in Finland in ways that many citizens had never experienced before.

In Finland, the coronavirus epidemic has brought about a crisis-semiotic process regarding the different techniques the state should use in order to cope with the virus. The laws regarding the operationalization of the so-called Emergency Powers Act were passed rapidly in the parliament on 17 March 2020, almost without opposing voices. This Act aims to “secure the livelihood of the population and the national economy, to maintain legal order and constitutional and human rights, and to safeguard the territorial integrity and independence of Finland in emergency conditions” (Ministry of Justice 1991). In this capacity, the Act allows the government to effectively re-territorialize the state. In particular, it allows the government to set up restrictions regarding the everyday life and movement of people, as well as to regulate the working hours of some occupations.

It may not be a terrible exaggeration to suggest that the geopolitical history of the Finnish state – the memory of the bloody civil war (1918), the role of both external and internal threats to the existing societal order during the post-World War II years, and the longstanding state-orchestrated efforts to construct a coherent nation-state – manifests itself in this Finnish emergency legislation. It is important to notice in this context that the restrictions have prompted only minuscule resistance in Finland. The territorialization of the pandemic around the seemingly coherent nation-state hence fundamentally characterizes COVID-19 geopolitics in Finland. Irrespective of the geographical concentration of the COVID-19 epidemic in the Helsinki city-region, the restrictions have applied uniformly across state territory.

The application of the Emergency Powers Act made the power of the Finnish state visible in ways unimaginable for those who understand the Nordic model narrowly as a kind of progressive “non-statehood” from which the coercive use of force is rooted out. In Finland, the government closed schools, universities, museums, restaurants and libraries. The state also banned gatherings of more than ten people, closed the borders of the state, and even closed the borders of the Uusimaa province for a limited period of time in order to prevent the spread of

the virus within the state. The state therefore declared a state of exception that restricted individual rights in the name of collective benefits that touch upon health, economy and the rule of law. In promulgating the Emergency Powers Act, the government also subordinated cities and regions under their powers. Taken together, the Emergency Powers Act re-territorialized the state and rendered the state's territorial sovereignty visible in ways not seen in Finland since the end of the World War II.

In Finland, political parties across the political spectrum as well as other social forces have agreed that it is the role of the state to pull the nation through the crisis. An understanding that the state needs to rescue private firms with public money has been one important aspect of this consensus. The COVID-19 pandemic is thus widely recognized as an external shock to capitalism that, together with potentially severe internal crisis tendencies (the falling rate of profits, in particular), fundamentally challenges the existing "national" societal system. Not surprisingly, the imperative of growth has played a key role in framing the COVID-19 epidemic as a political and geopolitical crisis of the nation-state. So powerful is the national framing of the crisis that the Finnish government has not been overly sympathetic toward the proposed European Union (EU)-wide economic rescue packages that would increase joint liability among the EU member states. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic potentially strengthens economic nationalism, a phenomenon that the so-called progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2019) has sought to root out since early 1990s.

COVID-19 has been particularly problematic for a "globalized state" whose geopolitical strategies have since the 1990s underscored the importance of linking the state with the upper parts of global value chains (Moisio 2018). Moreover, the globalized state of Finland has taken a largely positive attitude toward the outsourcing of manual industrial labor to Asia and elsewhere over the past two decades. As a result, the country has become highly dependent on global production chains; these have proven to be vulnerable in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, the political tackling of COVID-19 in Finland is interesting from the perspective of materialist state theory and state power (see e.g. Jessop 2019). This theory has two major strands. First, the state can be understood as an instrument of class rule, a mere executive committee that exerts state power in order to maintain favorable political conditions for economic exploitation conducted by the whole of the economic elite. Second, the state can be conceptualized as a relatively autonomous social organization that is capable of regulating and manipulating the class struggle in the public interest. These competing positions can be briefly examined in the context of the Finnish government's actions during the crisis.

In order to rescue the existing societal system, the government of Finland has prepared a set of financial aid packages to pull private firms through the economic hardships caused by the epidemic. To date, the additional financing packages launched by the government exceed €15 billion. In addition, the state offers

guarantees to banks that grant loans to firms, for example (The Finnish Government 2020). Even though significant sums of public money will be injected into private companies – an act that will significantly increase public debt – even the hardest protagonists of the politics of austerity have accepted these financial methods as an absolute necessity.

During the COVID-19 crisis, many of the actions of the government of Finland have made visible the role of the state as an ultimate guarantor of capitalist social formations. The state has appeared as the last resort. The strategies, calculations and interactions of the Finnish state management and businesses have partially come together in the context of the government's financial actions. At the same time, however, the Finnish government has not acted as if it were a mere committee of the capitalist class to maintain its political supremacy. Rather, the actions of the Finnish government signal the relative autonomy of the state.

The government of Finland announced and maintained lockdown against the will of some key fractions of capital, and legitimized its actions as necessary measures to protect the life of its citizens. As such, the Finnish government has found itself in a position between safeguarding a “healthy” accumulation process upon which its power (and tax revenue) partly depends (cf. Offe and Ronge 1982) on the one hand, and preventing the large-scale death of its citizens on the other. Even though the center-left government started to lift some of the restrictions in early May, it has not done so with the speed demanded by, for instance, the Confederation of Finnish Industries, other representatives of businesses, or various expert groups consisting of economists. The rapid lifting of restrictions has been advocated as a potentially rewarding political strategy by societal forces that seek to restart the national (and global) economic engine as soon as possible. For those forces, bringing people back to work is the best way to tackle the crisis. Accordingly, in a country where most people sell their labor power, “the impossibility to do so threatens life itself, even if spared by COVID-19” (for a critical analysis of this logic, see Mezzadri 2020). The center-right opposition, too, have shared the view that the restrictions must be lifted carefully and relatively slowly.

In sum, even if the COVID-19 crisis has disclosed the nature of the state apparatus as a set of bureaucratic practices, as an embodiment of bureaucratic “state work” and as a field of inter-bureaucratic conflicts and contestation (Moisio et al. 2020), the government has remained coherent regarding its supposed fundamental task. The Finnish government has sought to maintain the basic economic foundation of society by injecting public money and in mediating struggles between social forces.

### **Coda: understanding the political role of health care in the context of COVID-19**

Karl Polanyi (1957) suggested famously that all economic activities are embedded in extra-economic institutions, and that these institutions are crucial

in times of crisis. The concept of extra-economic refers to the values, norms and institutionalized practices such as education and health care (cf. Jessop and Sum 2006) that are crucial both in capitalist production process and in social reproduction. It is crucial to recognize the central role of healthcare during the COVID-19 crisis. This extra-economic institution has indeed played a triple role during the crisis. First, it has provided the actual medical infrastructure to heal those who have contracted the COVID-19. Second, the maintenance of the critical infrastructure of the healthcare system (including the extra capacity of intensive care) has legitimized the use of the state's territorial power during the COVID-19 crisis. Third, the whole issue of national health has intensified the relationship between state power and civil society. Simultaneously, articulations of public health as a firmly territorialized national interest have provided the necessary discursive setting for the government to mediate between the interests of different social forces and factions of capital. Taken together, healthcare can be understood as a statist extra-economic institution that extends well beyond medical practices.

In Finland, state-orchestrated national healthcare includes two key parts, both of which have played a notable role during the COVID-19 crisis. First, the hierarchical spatial system of hospitals and health care centers is the foundation of the medical practices needed to tackle the epidemic. This system originates in the 1960s when a novel, biopolitically articulated priority emerged with the aim of generating a growth-oriented and healthy citizen capable of contributing to modern industrial and economic life (Kivelä and Moisio 2017). The related construction of the spatially extensive network of hospitals was an important geopolitical act. It aimed at connecting citizens firmly to the institutional and symbolic structures of the state. A four-tier hierarchy of healthcare institutions ranging from a handful of university hospitals that were located in major cities and central hospitals located in provincial centers, to district hospitals in smaller towns, and finally to health centers in smaller municipalities, materialized in the 1970s. The state-orchestrated management of the COVID-19 crisis has rested on the spatially dispersed healthcare system whose origins are in a different geopolitical context.

Second, state-orchestrated healthcare includes an institutionalized system of knowledge production on the everyday aspects of national health and associated health risks and threats. In Finland, this dimension of healthcare originates in the 1960s and 1970s when the processes of maintaining and reproducing labor for the purposes of the political and economic functions of the modern Finnish nation-state became evident. Knowledge production was institutionalized as a statist practice through the establishment of a state research institute on public health (today, *The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare*). The idea of the institute was to provide state authorities with actionable knowledge on the interconnections between the everyday health behavior of Finns and the major national diseases affecting a population's capabilities to

enhance national development in a geopolitically sensitive environment (Kivelä 2017).

During the COVID-19 crisis, the Finnish government has relied on knowledge provided by a research institute that was founded during an era of high Keynesianism. Knowledge concerning the relationship between the virus and societal dynamics has proven to be politically valuable. One may consider this knowledge as a resource that the government harnesses in efforts to mediate conflicts among social forces during the crisis. The key here is not whether the government actually follows precisely the advice of professionals who produce expert knowledge primarily through practices of modeling. Rather, the key is that such knowledge contributes to a larger pool of relevant knowledge that actually enables the government to govern. In other words, even though many experts have expressed differing opinions regarding the best way to tackle the COVID-19 epidemic in Finland, the experts and scientists working at the *Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare* have nonetheless provided the government with valuable insights and predictions on the society/COVID-19 interface. As a testament of the centrality of expert knowledge in managing the crisis, some of the “national health experts” working for the state have become popular figures in the Finnish media. Not surprisingly, they discuss COVID-19 not only in biological terms, but also with reference to politics, economy and society.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## ORCID

Sami Moisio  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9202-1380>

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